

GUIDE FOR INTERPRETING

The Notorious Jumping Frog of Calaveras County

Humor. In literature, humor refers to writing that is intended to evoke laughter. To accomplish this purpose, writers must have the ability to perceive the ridiculous, comical, or ludicrous aspects of an incident, situation, or personality and to depict them in an amusing manner.

Humorists use a variety of techniques to make their work amusing. For example, the western humorists, including Mark Twain, made extensive uses of exaggeration in their writing. Certain incidents and details were exaggerated to such a great extent that they became comical. Usually, the exaggerated incidents or events were described by a narrator or storyteller in a very serious tone. This tone made the tale more humorous, because it created the impression that the storyteller was unaware of the ridiculousness of what he or she was describing.

Regional dialects—the colloquial languages of people living in certain areas—were another important element of western humor. The use of regional dialects helped to capture local color and made the characters more interesting and amusing. For example, Simon Wheeler's use of regional dialect in “The Notorious Jumping Frog of Calaveras County” helps make him a very entertaining character, and his frequent use of unexpected words adds to the humor of the story.

Commentary

According to one of Mark Twain's biographers, Twain first heard the story that was to become “The Notorious Jumping Frog of Calaveras County” in the barroom of a rundown tavern in Angel’s Camp, California, while he himself was prospecting for gold. The storyteller was a former Illinois River pilot named Ben Coon, “a solemn, fat-witted person, who dozed by the stove, or told slow, endless stories, without point or application.” Twain found it “soothing and comfortable to listen to his endless narratives, told in that solemn way, with no suspicion of humor.”

Like the jumping frog story, many of Twain’s stories were based on stories heard in bars, on the trail, or around campfires. To what extent should writers be given credit for stories they merely retell? What do writers need to bring to retold stories to make them their own?

Think of a humorous story you have heard in which exaggeration was used. Then briefly discuss why you think the use of exaggeration in the story makes it amusing.

Writers’ Techniques

Focus

The Notorious Jumping Frog of Calaveras County

Mark Twain

In compliance with the request of a friend of mine, who wrote me from the East, I called on good-natured, garrulous old Simon Wheeler, and inquired after my friend's friend, Leonidas W. Smiley, as requested to do, and I hereunto append the result. I have a lurking suspicion that *Leonidas W. Smiley* is a myth; that my friend never knew such a personage; and that he only conjectured that if I asked old Wheeler about him, it would remind him of his infamous *Jim Smiley*, and he would go to work and bore me to death with some exasperating reminiscence of him as long and as tedious as it should be useless to me. If that was the design, it succeeded.

I found Simon Wheeler dozing comfortably by the barroom stove of the dilapidated tavern in the decayed mining camp of Angel's, and I noticed that he was fat and bald-headed, and had an expression of winning gentleness and simplicity upon his tranquil countenance. He roused up, and gave me good day. I told him a friend of mine had commissioned me to make some inquiries about a cherished companion of his boyhood named *Leonidas W. Smiley*—Rev. *Leonidas W. Smiley*, a young minister of the Gospel, who he had heard was at one time a resident of Angel's Camp. I added that if Mr. Wheeler could tell me anything about this Rev. *Leonidas W. Smiley*, I would feel under many obligations to him.

Simon Wheeler backed me into a corner and blockaded me there with his chair, and then sat down and reeled off the mono-

nous narrative which follows this paragraph. He never smiled, he never frowned, he never changed his voice from the gentle-flowing key to which he tuned his initial sentence, he never betrayed the slightest suspicion of enthusiasm; but all through the interminable narrative there ran a vein of impressive earnestness and sincerity, which showed me plainly that, so far from his imagining that there was anything ridiculous or funny about his story, he regarded it as a really important matter, and admired its two heroes as men of transcendent genius in *finesse*. I let him go on in his own way, and never interrupted him once.

"Rev. *Leonidas W. H'm*, Reverend Le—well, there was a feller here once by the name of *Jim Smiley*, in the winter of '49—or maybe it was the spring of '50—I don't recollect exactly, somehow, though what makes me think it was one or the other is because I remember the big flume¹ warn't finished when he first come to the camp; but anyway, he was the curiosest man about always betting on anything that turned up you ever see, if he could get anybody to bet on the other side; and if he couldn't he'd change sides. Any way that suited the other man would suit *him*—any way just so's he got a bet, *he* was satisfied. But still he was lucky, uncommon lucky; he most always come out winner. He was always ready and laying for a chance; there couldn't be no solit'ry thing

1. **flume** (floom) *n.*: An artificial channel for carrying water to provide power and transport objects.

mentioned but that feller'd offer to bet on it, and take ary side you please, as I was just telling you. If there was a horse race, you'd find him flush or you'd find him busted at the end of it; if there was a dogfight, he'd bet on it; if there was a cat fight, he'd bet on it; if there was a chicken fight, he'd bet on it; why, if there was two birds setting on a fence, he would bet you which one would fly first; or if there was a camp meeting,² he would be there reg'lar to bet on Parson Walker, which he judged to be the best exhorter about here and so he was too, and a good man. If he even see a straddle bug³ start to go anywhere, he would bet you how long it would take him to get to—to wherever he was going to, and if you took him up, he would foller that straddle bug to Mexico but what he would find out where he was bound for and how long he was on the road. Lots of the boys here has seen that Smiley, and can tell you about him. Why, it never made no difference to *him*—he'd bet on *any* thing—the dangdest feller. Parson Walker's wife laid very sick once, for a good while, and it seemed as if they warn't going to save her; but one morning he come in, and Smiley up and asked him how she was, and he said she was considerable better—thank the Lord for his inf'nite mercy—and coming on so smart that with the blessing of Prov'dence she'd get well yet; and Smiley, before he thought, says, 'Well, I'll resk two-and-a-half she don't anyway.'

Thish-yer Smiley had a mare—the boys called her the fifteen-minute nag, but that was only in fun, you know, because of course she was faster than that—and he used to win money on that horse, for all she was so slow and always had the asthma, or the dis temper, or the consumption, or something of that kind. They used to give her two or three hundred yards start, and then pass her under way; but always at the fag end⁴ of

the race she'd get excited and desperate like, and come cavorting and straddling up, and scattering her legs around limber, some times in the air, and sometimes out to one side among the fences, and kicking up m-o-r-e dust and raising m-o-r-e racket with her coughing and sneezing and blowing her nose—and always fetch up at the stand just about a neck ahead, as near as you could cipher it down.

And he had a little small bull-pup, that to look at him you'd think he warn't worth a cent but to set around and look ornery and lay for a chance to steal something. But as soon as money was up on him he was a different dog; his under-jaw'd begin to stick out like the fo'castle⁵ of a steamboat, and his teeth would uncover and shine like the furnaces. And a dog might tackle him and bullyrag him, and bite him, and throw him over his shoulder two or three times, and Andrew Jackson—which was the name of the pup—Andrew Jackson would never let on but what he was satisfied, and hadn't expected nothing else—and the bets being doubled and doubled on the other side all the time, till the money was all up; and then all of a sudden he would grab that other dog jest by the j'int of his hind leg and freeze to it—not chaw, you understand, but only just grip and hang on till they throwed up the sponge, if it was a year. Smiley always come out winner on that pup, till he harnessed a dog once that didn't have no hind legs, because they'd been sawed off in a circular saw, and when the thing had gone along far enough, and the money was all up, and he come to make a snatch for his pet holt,⁶ he see in a minute how he'd been imposed on, and how the other dog had him in the door, so to speak, and he 'peared surprised, and then he looked sorter discouraged-like, and didn't try no more to win the fight, and so he got shucked out bad. He give Smiley a look, as much as to say his heart was broke, and it

2. camp meeting: A religious gathering at the mining camp.

3. straddle bug: An insect with long legs.

4. fag end: Last part.

5. fo'castle (fōk'sl) *n.*: Forecastle; the forward part of the upper deck.

6. holt: Hold.

was his fault, for putting up a dog that hadn't no hind legs for him to take holt of, which was his main dependence in a fight, and then he limped off a piece and laid down and died. It was a good pup, was that Andrew Jackson, and would have made a name for hisself if he'd lived, for the stuff was in him and he had genius—I know it, because he hadn't no opportunities to speak of, and it don't stand to reason that a dog could make such a fight as he could under them circumstances if he hadn't no talent. It always makes me feel sorry when I think of that last fight of his'n, and the way it turned out.

Well, thish-yer Smiley had rat terriers,⁷ and chicken cocks,⁸ and tomcats and all them kind of things, till you couldn't rest, and you couldn't fetch nothing for him to bet on but he'd match you. He ketched a frog one day, and took him home, and said he cal'lated to educate him; and so he never done nothing for three months but set in his back yard and learn that frog to jump. And you bet you he *did* learn him, too. He'd give him a little punch behind, and the next minute you'd see that frog whirling in the air like a doughnut—see him turn one summer-set, or maybe a couple, if he got a good start, and come down flatfooted and all right, like a cat. He got him up so in the matter of ketching flies, and kep' him in practice so constant, that he'd nail a fly every time as fur as he could see him. Smiley said all a frog wanted was education, and he could do 'most anything—and I believe him. Why, I've seen him set Dan'l Webster down here on this floor—Dan'l Webster was the name of the frog—and sing out, "Flies, Dan'l, flies!" and quicker'n you could wink he'd spring straight up and snake a fly off'n the counter there, and flop down on the floor ag'in as solid as a gob of mud, and fall to scratching the side of his head with his hind foot as indifferent as if he hadn't no idea he'd been doin' any more'n any frog might do. You

never see a frog so modest and straight-for'ard as he was, for all he was so gifted. And when it come to fair and square jumping on a dead level, he could get over more ground at one straddle than any animal of his breed you ever see. Jumping on a dead level was his strong suit, you understand; and when it come to that, Smiley would ante up money on him as long as he had a red.⁹ Smiley was monstrous proud of his frog, and well he might be, for fellers that had traveled and been everywheres all said he laid over any frog that ever they see.

Well, Smiley kep' the beast in a little lattice box, and he used to fetch him downtown sometimes and lay for a bet. One day a feller—a stranger in the camp, he was—come acrost him with his box, and says:

'What might it be that you've got in the box?'

And Smiley says, sorter indifferent-like, 'It might be a parrot, or it might be a canary, maybe, but it ain't—it's only just a frog.'

And the feller took it, and looked at it careful, and turned it round this way and that, and says, 'H'm—so 'tis. Well, what's he good for?'

'Well,' Smiley says, easy and careless, 'he's good enough for *one* thing, I should judge—he can outjump any frog in Calaveras county.'

The feller took the box again, and took another long, particular look, and give it back to Smiley, and says, very deliberate, 'Well,' he says, 'I don't see no p'ints about that frog that's any better'n any other frog.'

'Maybe you don't,' Smiley says. 'Maybe you understand frogs and maybe you don't understand 'em; maybe you've had experience, and maybe you ain't only a amateur, as it were. Anyways, I've got my opinion, and I'll resk forty dollars that he can outjump any frog in Calaveras county.'

And the feller studied a minute, and then says, kinder sad like, 'Well, I'm only a

7. **rat terriers:** Dogs skilled in catching rats.
8. **chicken cocks:** Roosters trained to fight.

9. **a red:** A red cent.



MARK TWAIN (SAMUEL L. CLEMENS) RIDING
THE CELEBRATED JUMPING FROG
An English Caricature
by Frederic Waddy, 1872

stranger here, and I ain't got no frog; but if I had a frog, I'd bet you.'

And then Smiley says, 'That's all right—that's all right—if you'll hold my box a minute, I'll go and get you a frog.' And so the feller took the box, and put up his forty dollars along with Smiley's, and set down to wait.

So he set there a good while thinking and thinking to hisself, and then he got the frog out and prized his mouth open and took a teaspoon and filled him full of quail-shot¹⁰—filled him pretty near up to his chin—and set him on the floor. Smiley he went to the swamp and slopped around in the mud for a long time, and finally he ketched a frog, and fetched him in, and give him to this feller, and says:

'Now, if you're ready, set him alongside of Dan'l, with his forepaws just even with Dan'l's, and I'll give the word.' Then he says, 'One—two—three—git!' and him and the feller touched up the frogs from behind, and the new frog hopped off lively, but Dan'l give a heave, and hysted up his shoulders—so—

10. **quailshot:** Small lead pellets used for shooting quail.

like a Frenchman, but it warn't no use—he couldn't budge; he was planted as solid as a church, and he couldn't no more stir than if he was anchored out. Smiley was a good deal surprised, and he was disgusted too, but he didn't have no idea what the matter was, of course.

The feller took the money and started away; and when he was going out at the door, he sorter jerked his thumb over his shoulder—so—at Dan'l, and says again, very deliberate, 'Well,' he says, 'I don't see no p'ints about that frog that's any better'n any other frog.'

Smiley he stood scratching his head and looking down at Dan'l a long time, and at last he says, 'I do wonder what in the nation that frog throw'd off for—I wonder if there ain't something the matter with him—he 'pears to look mighty baggy, somehow.' And he ketched Dan'l by the nap of the neck, and hefted him, and says, 'Why blame my cats if he don't weigh five pound!' and turned him upside down and he belched out a double handful of shot. And then he see how it was, and he was the maddest man—he set the frog down and took out after that feller, but he never ketched him. And—'

Here Simon Wheeler heard his name called from the front yard, and got up to see what was wanted. And turning to me as he moved away, he said: "Just set where you are, stranger, and rest easy—I ain't going to be gone a second."

But, by your leave, I did not think that a continuation of the history of the enterprising vagabond Jim Smiley would be likely to afford me much information concerning the Rev. Leonidas W. Smiley, and so I started away.

At the door I met the sociable Wheeler returning, and he buttonholed me and recommenced:

"Well, thish-yer Smiley had a yaller one-eyed cow that didn't have no tail, only just a short stump like a bannanner, and—"

However, lacking both time and inclination, I did not wait to hear about the afflicted cow, but took my leave.

RESPONDING TO THE SELECTION

Your Response

1. Twain called this story "the best humorous sketch America has produced." What is your opinion?
2. If Mark Twain were a stand-up comic today, would you buy a ticket to his one-man show? Why or why not?

Recalling

3. What happens when the narrator asks Simon Wheeler about Leonidas W. Smiley?
4. Why is Jim Smiley described as "infamous"?
5. (a) How did Smiley's mare win races? (b) How did Smiley's bull-pup win fights? (c) What happened during the pup's last fight?
6. (a) How did Smiley educate his frog? (b) How did a stranger outsmart Smiley?

Interpreting

7. (a) Based on his language, how would you describe the anonymous narrator? (b) How would you describe Simon Wheeler? (c) Of the two narrators, why do you think Twain chose Wheeler to tell the story of Jim Smiley?
8. How does the contrast between the anonymous narrator and Simon Wheeler add to the effectiveness of the story?
9. What do you think is most absurd about Wheeler's description of (a) the bull-pup Andrew Jackson and (b) the frog Dan'l Webster?

Applying

10. Why do you think people enjoy telling and listening to tall tales such as the one told by Simon Wheeler?

ANALYZING LITERATURE

Recognizing Humor

In literature, **humor** refers to writing intended to evoke laughter. To accomplish this purpose, western humorists made extensive use of exaggeration and regional dialects in their writing. For example, in "The Notorious Jumping Frog of Calaveras County," westerner Simon Wheeler exaggerates when describing the frog's talents. He describes the frog as if it were intelligent and

thoughtful, commenting, "You never see a frog so modest and straightfor'ard as he was, for all he was so gifted."

1. (a) Find two more examples of exaggeration in the story. (b) Explain why each of these examples is amusing.
2. Why would the story be less effective if Wheeler spoke in standard English?
3. In "How to Tell a Story" Mark Twain wrote, "The humorous story may be spun out to great length, and may wander around as much as it pleases, and arrive nowhere in particular. . ." Explain how this technique is evident in this tale.
4. Twain continued, "The humorous story is told gravely; the teller does his best to conceal the fact that he even dimly suspects there is anything funny about it." Explain how this technique is evident in this tale.

CRITICAL THINKING AND READING

Appreciating Dialect

Part of what makes Wheeler's use of **dialect** amusing is his frequently unexpected or unusual choice of words. For example, Wheeler's use of the word *monstrous* to describe the extent of Smiley's pride in his frog is unusual.

What is unexpected or unusual about the choice of words in each of the following passages from the story?

1. "And a dog might tackle him and bullyrag him, . . ."
2. "Now if you're ready, set him alongside of Dan'l, with his forepaws just even with Dan'l's, . . ."

THINKING AND WRITING

Writing a Story Using Dialect

Imagine that your school literary magazine has asked you to write a story in which the characters speak in a regional dialect. Think of a region in which people speak in a distinctive manner. Then develop a story in which you capture the local color of this region through the use of dialect and vivid descriptions of the setting. When you finish writing, revise your story and share it with your classmates.